

We must learn to live within existing resources

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It's easy to spot water waste in Las Vegas, isn't it? There are those mammoth fountains and water features along The Strip. How about the lush golf courses and inviting swimming pools that dot the landscape?

Interestingly, those amenities aren't the problem. Las Vegas has the same water-waste problems that many Western cities have — inefficient indoor water use. We're talking leaks, old toilets, older model washing machines and dishwashers and old faucets and shower heads that use inordinate amounts of water.

Las Vegas has made some progress in reducing outdoor water consumption through outdoor conservation efforts, which include a program that encourages property owners to replace grass with water-efficient landscaping, not wash their cars at home and to cover their swimming pools to help control evaporation.

Through a variety of outdoor and indoor conservation measures, Las Vegas could save 30-40 percent of the water it currently uses, according to the new study, "Hidden Oasis: Water Conservation and Efficiency in Las Vegas" by the Pacific Institute and Western Resource Advocates. This could postpone the need to develop new water resources, which is a significant matter considering Las Vegas is one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the United States.

Why does any of this matter to Utahns? The Southern Nevada Water Authority has applied for groundwater rights in six basins, including the Snake Valley, which straddles the Utah-Nevada border. Area ranchers and environmentalists say drawing down groundwater will devastate the area. They say there's scarcely enough water there to supply the valley's few residents, livestock and wildlife. Drawing off groundwater threatens the health of the eco-system because pressure created by underground freshwater aquifers staves off encroachment by salt water.

If the conclusions of "Hidden Oasis" are correct, SNWA doesn't need to develop Snake Valley water to meet future demands. It needs to institute more stringent measures to conserve water,

which would reduce the authority's costs in developing new sources. It also would save electricity, which is no small matter in the City of Lights. SNWA is the largest single consumer of electricity in Nevada. According to the study, SNWA's annual electrical use — 1 million megawatt hours of energy to divert and treat water — is enough to power 88,000 homes for a year.

Reducing electrical use — and the burning of coal to produce it — sounds like a page right out of the playbook to reduce global warming.

Despite millions of reasons to behave differently — to take concrete steps to conserve water to eliminate or at least postpone the need to develop new water resources — SNWA's applications for groundwater rights are moving forward. One application was granted, in part.

My deepest fear with this issue is that the people of Snake Valley, who have the most compelling case to preserve their water as one can imagine, will be outgunned legally. SNWA has a lot more resources at its disposal, proceeds of wholesale water sales, and sales-tax collections to name just two. The affected Utahns will need state resources to fight to protect this water resource.

"Hidden Oasis," requested by the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada and funded by two private foundations, is instructive to many Western states, including Utah. The days of large-scale federal water projects are over. We've got to step up conservation efforts to live within existing resources. When new water development is necessary, we have to figure out how to pay for it and do the least amount of environmental damage.

If one has money and access to new resources, it's a lot less grief to obtain more water than it is to retrain people in the desert who are accustomed to long, hot showers and Kentucky bluegrass lawns.

But just because we can doesn't necessarily mean we should, does it?

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